

# Listening skills prized in crisis debriefing team



**Capt. Paul J. Milazzo, Critical Incident Stress Management Team element leader**

**BY JENNIFER E. WEST**

## Nucleus Staff

Williams Shakespeare's "...lend me your ears..." could be the words borrowed by Capt. Paul J. Milazzo as he recruits members for a valuable debriefing team that helps traumatized people, using empathetic listening skills. But he is also asking for your brains, your hearts and, in extreme situations, your stomachs. Milazzo, who serves as Life Skills Support Center element leader for the 377<sup>th</sup> Medical Group Medical Operations Squadron, heads the Critical Incident Stress Management team at Kirtland AFB.

Members in the Kirtland AFB-Albuquerque Area Critical Incident Stress Management Team are trained to help people who have been exposed to highly stressful incidents like line of duty deaths, aircraft mishaps, automobile accidents, acts of terrorism, natural disasters or deployment to war zones. But, more frequently, team members offer a range of services, including crisis intervention, helping individuals on a one-on-one basis for situations involving less than catastrophic events, in peer debriefing, education and follow-up for the community.

"(CISM) is a variety of services that include intervention before, during or after (an event)," said

Maj. John F. Leckie of the 377<sup>th</sup> Medical Operations Squadron.

"If someone witnesses their friend burn on a flightline or a burning car or a child dies or drowns...they all have an emotional response," Leckie added. "Some people will develop significant problems in response to the traumatic event. And being on the CISM team can help people prevent severe responses and help everybody recover faster."

"When someone is traumatized after an incident, they are much more likely to perform poorly or to be unable to perform work altogether," Milazzo noted. "(And) they tend to seek medical care frequently and experience unresolved problems in their relationships."

Problems on the job and in personal relationships translate to problems with mission readiness for the Air Force, therefore, helping the individuals helps the military.

"Critical incident stress management is like emotional first aid, Milazzo explained. Although team members do not use psychotherapy, they are able to provide information on referral to appropriate mental health or other care providers as needed.

CISM team member Teresa L. Reinhard works as a work/life consultant at the Kirtland AFB Family Support Center, served as the base point of contact for Gen. Lester L. Lyles' Year of the Family 2001-02 and serves now as the Kirtland AFB Quality of Life point of contact for 2003.

"People are our most valuable resource, and this is one more tool to protect our people so they can be fully there for their families, work and community,"

Reinhard noted. "I think (CISM skills are) an important skill to possess and is an extremely valuable resource for our community."

The impact of training can reach beyond team members' preparation for deployment with the CISM team, Reinhard noted. Although Reinhard has not yet been deployed to any large-scale incidents, she uses similar techniques in her day-to-day work in individual counseling session for people who have been sexually assaulted and for victims of burglary.

"The training allows me to expand the types of services I can provide to the (TEAM KIRTLAND) community and complements very nicely my role here at the Family Support Center," Reinhard explained.

Joining the team that is open to military members, federal civilians and contractors, Reinhard said, was her desire to make "a positive difference in the lives of others gives meaning to my life."

Staff Sgt. Theresea M. Coccozziello, noncommissioned officer in charge at the Psychological Services in the medical group, originally joined a CISM team in 1996 and has participated in real world debriefings after being trained at Eglin AFB, Fla.

"I wanted to join the team to be "in the middle" of the event," Coccozziello said. "I came into the military to fly. But after attending survival and Boom Operator schools, she was medically prevented from becoming an Air Force pilot. She then turned her sight toward discovering in activities that would still al-

## DEBRIEFING TEAM

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*Photos by Todd Berenger*

**TEAM KIRTLAND members on the Kirtland AFB-Albuquerque Area Critical Incident Stress Management Team are trained to help people who have been exposed to highly stressful incidents.**



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low her to be in the action. The debriefing team was her solution to that goal as well as an enhancement to her daily work with people.

"My first experience was during the Kobar Towers bombing," Cocozziello explained. "A group of us did shifts to have 24-hour accessibility in case friends or family wanted to come and talk...I was a part of one of the groups that were family and friends of a particular person."

So far, she has not been able to participate as part of the Kirtland AFB team during her two years of service, but is continuing her training.

Originally, the team mission was helping first responders to tragedies, but others not at the scene can also be affected emotionally. For example, debriefing would be useful in the case of the loss of a military person in the line of duty or someone who loses a family member in a natural disaster or catastrophe like the Sept. 11 terrorists attacks. Leckie explained the debriefings sessions also used to educate military members deploying in war to help them know what to expect on a battlefield. Armed with information, they may not become psychological casualties.

Anyone interested in learning CISM techniques who is able to participate is needed and welcome to join. You don't need a degree in psychology or to be in the human services career fields to become a member. All you need, Reinhard notes, is the desire and motivation to work with people needing the

debriefings and to learn the skills to be an effective and competent team member.

But membership is serious business and can be uncomfortable and stressful even though the members' role is guiding only. Debriefers must be able to listen quietly and attentively to a traumatized person expressing feelings and be comfortable making frequent eye contact with the person being debriefed. Team members listen and communicate empathetically and can provide information victims can use to help themselves work through their trauma. While members do not counsel or provide solutions, they can educate victims about what they might expect to experience in the aftermath of the situation and empathize during the victims' initial stage of traumatic stress. And, of course, team members should be able to work well in a team environment.

Sometimes, the victims' expressions of emotion can be difficult to hear, especially if victims are describing grisly scenes they've witnessed. Debriefing, in some cases, is not for the queasy.

"It's really a process for educating people and helping them to make sense of what happened to them and not about therapy or finding fault and blame," Reinhard said.

Debriefings, which are completely confidential for the victim and which are not documented, are done without the presence of Air Force officials or civilian news media who are barred from the sessions.

For information about joining the team and about team training, contact Milazzo at 846-3305 or paul.milazzo@kirtland.af.mil.



Photo by Aaron Hendren

Richard Keppler

## DE's Keppler retires from 44 years of federal service

BY AARON HENDREN

AFRL Directed Energy Directorate

The Air Force Research Laboratory's Directed Energy Directorate lost a valuable asset Sept. 30 when a 44-year federal service employee retired. Richard Keppler retired after 16 years at Kirtland AFB, ending his career as a program administrator for Special Programs in the Human Resources Office. In that capacity, he had oversight of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Program for the Phillips Research Site.

He was the senior technical coordinator for the Cooperative Development Branch here, 1998-99. Keppler worked in the Office of the Chief Scientist, Air Force Phillips Laboratory, now called now the Air Force Research Laboratory, 1991-1998.

Keppler began his civil service career in 1987 as the technical coordinator for the Office of the Chief Scientist, Air Force Weapons Laboratory. He was responsible for the implementation and follow-on actions/matters for numerous programs. When Phillips Laboratory was activated in 1990, he was responsible for the unification, consolidation and standardization of the former Weapons Laboratory here, the Astronautics Laboratory at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., and the Geophysics Laboratory at Hanscom AFB, Mass.



## Honesty pays

Robert Adame, a housekeeper work leader at the 377th Services Squadron's Lodging office, made an Air Force major and her son happy recently when he found and returned \$1,900 left in a lodging room.

Adame, while cleaning a temporary lodging facility room, found an envelope with the cash in a box of books left behind by a former TEAM KIRTLANDer Maj. Karen Ashley. The items left behind were slated for donation to an agency until Adame sifted through the items as part of his work that now includes managing a large lost and found for lodging.

Adame's honesty and integrity was recognized with the Special Act Award by his squadron. He also received a \$500 reward.